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Hospitality

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The term “hospitality” often translates the Greek φιλοξενία (*philoxenia*), for which a more faithful but less handy rendition would be the “loving care shown to strangers.” The concept is closely related to that of φιλανθρωπία (*philanthropia*) — the “love for fellow human beings.” In ancient Greece and Rome, these two terms defined the borders of the civilized world (Hiltbrunner, 1972; 1992; 2005; Chadwick, 1992; Constable, 2003). Odysseus elegantly expressed this distinction upon his return to Ithaca:

<quote>Alas, to the land of what mortals have I now come? Are they cruel, and wild, and unjust? Or are they kind to strangers (*philoxenoi*) and fear the gods in their thoughts? (*Od.* 13.200-203, trans. Murray)</quote>

Being outside of their home, strangers possessed no rights and depended on hospitality for their survival. Odysseus, returning home, was considered a stranger and quickly discovered that people in this category could be subjected to every kind of maltreatment: the suitors who courted his wife Penelope during his long absence even considered selling him as a slave (*Od.* 20.383). Here it is important to notice the sharp contrast Homer makes between the suitors, whom he portrays at the end of the epic as irreverent because they are inhospitable, and the “godlike Telemachus,” the son of Odysseus, who at the beginning of the *Odyssey* unknowingly welcomes the goddess Athene dressed as a stranger (*Od.* 1.123). Such hospitality was offered as a religious duty to Zeus *Xenios*, the protector of strangers (*Od.* 6.207). It was considered beneficial to both sides: the guest received protection against potential abuse, and the host allowed for divine revelation to occur through the unknown visitor. On the human level, and for those in the upper echelons of society, the duty to offer hospitality could be formalized through a special rite that established a bond of kinship between the two parties involved. This relationship, known as *xenia* or *xeinosyne*, was initiated by the exchange of special gifts of hospitality (*Od.* 21.31-35).

What this exchange inaugurated was not an ordinary friendship but a perpetual “ritualized friendship.” King Agamemnon could thus address Amphimedon even in the underworld: “I declare that I am your guest (*xeinos*)” (*Od.* 24.114; Herman, 1987, 59). The visible sign of the ritualized friendship were the *symbola* (symbols), or *tesserae hospitales* (tokens of hospitality), which were exchanged between the two parties and could be used later to identify them, or their descendants, and thus restore the relationship of protection and the commitment to offer mutual hospitality: “the gift was meant to symbolize the establishment of obligations which, ideally, would last forever” (Herman, 1987, 61). Reflections of the Homeric views on hospitality are visible in the literary output of other poets, philosophers, historians, and orators, as well as in the surviving epigraphic evidence (gathered in Herman, 1987, 166-184). The hospitality envisaged here was to be reciprocal – offered by Greeks to fellow Greeks – thus defining the Hellenic civilization in terms which would exclude all “barbarian” outsiders (Constantelos, 1968).

The first Christians who inhabited this world, on the other hand, were encouraged to be hospitable to all and not just to those who belonged to their faith (Gorce, 1925; Miquel & Viard, 1969; Greer, 1986; Arterbury, 2005; Jipp, 2017). Significantly, the beginning and the end of the gospel story are connected with a request for hospitality. At his birth in Bethlehem, Jesus identified with those in need of shelter (Luke 2:7) and later taught of the great judgement in similar terms: “I was a stranger (*xenos*) and you did not receive me as a guest, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me” (Matt 25:43). The gospel criterion for what would count as genuine Christian hospitality was that the “stranger” benefiting from it was someone who could not immediately return the favor, such as the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14:12-14). Thus, the earliest — and ideal — Christian community was presented as having everything in common and sharing it with those in need (Acts 2-6). Bishops and widows were to be models of hospitality (1 Tim 3:2; 5:10; Tit 1:7-8; Acts 16:14), but every Christian was expected to be hospitable (Rom 12:13; 15:7) and to do so without protesting (1 Pet 4:9). The command to offer hospitality was all-inclusive but special care was to be given to fellow believers (Gal 6:10). The exchange was understood as benefiting both the host

and the recipient. In this context, the patriarch Abraham was remembered, first in Judaism and then in Christianity, as the model for hospitality (Gen 18; Cohen, 2006). The exhortation — “not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers (*philoxenias*)” — remained central for Christians and was combined with the expectation of a reward as it was remembered that Abraham and Sarah had “entertained (*xenisantes*) angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:2). In the mid-2nd century, Christians were prepared to extend hospitality even outside of their homes to imprisoned believers (Luc. *Peregr.* 12-13). The writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers offer numerous testimonies to the supreme importance attached to general *philanthropia* and hospitality. Hermas was asked to keep correcting his children by instructing them to “minister to widows, to visit the orphans and the needy, to ransom the servants of God from their afflictions, to be hospitable” (Shepherd of Hermas, *Mandate* 8, 1[38]:10; *Vision* 1, 3:2). In the late first century, Clement of Rome praised Abraham but also added Lot and Rahab as those who had followed his example in being kind to strangers; their reward was that they were both “saved because of their hospitality” (1 Clement, 10-12). Thus, the lasting benefits to the host — divine revelation, salvation — were seen as being much greater than the temporary comfort and consolation enjoyed by the guest.

In this eternal perspective, the early Christians understood themselves as those who live in the world but are not of the world (*Epistle to Diognetus*, 5). The distinction made it possible for them to see themselves as equal to all other “strangers” who may arrive in their midst and thus spare nothing in their efforts to extend a Christian welcome. This, however, was not unlimited. In the *Didache*, for example, Christians were advised to provide no more than three days of free hospitality after which strangers and travelling preachers were expected to earn their own living (*Didache*, 11-12). The responsibility of supervising hospitality was given to the local bishop, who was expected to coordinate the provision and to guard against potential abuse (Justin, *First Apology*, 67; *Teaching of the Apostles* 2.58). Thus, the Council of Antioch (dated by some as early as 327) stated that: “No stranger should be given hospitality without a letter from his bishop” (canons 7-8), and regulated how a bishop should use church funds for this purpose (i.e. separate from the management of his private

property so as to ensure that “his family will avoid lawsuits and he will not be reproached after his death,” canons 24-25). Hospitality was to be offered in the homes of individual Christians and travelling clergy were forbidden from eating in taverns or staying the night there because of the lack of moral standards in such places (*Apostolic Canon* 54, probably of third- or early fourth-century origin).

The adoption of the classical notion of hospitality and its transformation in early Christianity makes the success of the new religion in late antiquity more comprehensible (Herman, 1997). It also makes the lament of the mid-4th century emperor Julian more poignant — for his complaint was that the Christians had become better at the key virtue of hospitality in which the Hellenes had previously excelled. Writing in the early summer of 362, Julian argued that it was Christian “benevolence to strangers (*peri tous xenous philanthropia*), their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism” (Julian, *Letter* 84, ed. Bidez; Kislinger, 1984). The letter was sent to the high-priest Arsacius of Galatia with instructions on how to combat Christianity--- which Julian called “atheism”--- by promoting the veneration of the ancient gods. The emperor was keen that Arsacius and the priests under his charge should follow the example of the Christians and organize the relief of the pagan poor by establishing “in all cities numerous hostels for strangers”. The use of the key word hostel (*xenodocheion*) suggests that Julian must have been familiar with the Christian practice of hospitality, especially in big cities such as Antioch and Constantinople where such hostels were established in the 4th century (Hiltbrunner, 1988). Julian’s plan was to extend a similar service (Julian, *Letter* 35, ed. Bidez), but he argued for it on exclusively Hellenic ground citing Homer as key authority: “one should offer loving welcome to the guest who arrives (*xeinon pereonta philein*, *Od.* 15.74). Julian knew that “Jews never have to beg” but his main concern was to outdo the “impious Galileans who were taking care not only of their own poor but of ours as well” (Julian, *Letter* 84, ed. Bidez). Despite the similarities, Julian’s project was less comprehensive as it included only the provision of food and shelter for the living. Yet the emperor tried to build into it another key Christian ingredient: the exchange of letters of recommendation. According to the later testimony of Sozomen, Julian used

as his model the συνθήματα (*synthemata*), letters given by bishops to Christian travelers commending them to the hospitality of other bishops (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.16). These testimonies reveal how intense and well organized Christian hospitality — and with it the emerging Christian civilization — had become by the mid-4th century.

Julian's reforms were interrupted by his sudden death in 363, after which the Christian commitment to hospitality grew even stronger. Three decades later, John Chrysostom was proud that his community at Antioch was able to care — on a daily basis — for 3,000 widows, prisoners, travelers, and patients of ill health (*Homily on Matthew* 66.3). During the famine in 369, Basil of Caesarea opened a center for the poor, which quickly became, in his own words:

<quote>A place of entertainment for strangers, both for those who are on a journey and for those who require medical treatment on account of sickness, and so establishing a means of giving these visitors the comfort they want, physicians, doctors, means of conveyance, and escort. (Basil, *Letter* 94)</quote>

Basil's institution was not unique, and he mentions other *ptochotrophia* in Pontus (Basil, *Letter* 142; see also Epiphanius, *Panarion* 75.1). Similar charitable projects quickly sprang up in other parts of the empire under the supervision of local bishops, who thus acquired new forms of leadership in their respective cities (Brown, 2002; Finn, 2006; Stathakopoulos, 2013). Eventually, even the wife of Theodosius I, the empress Flacilla, became involved ministering herself to poor and ill strangers (Gregory of Nyssa, *Funeral Oration for the Empress Flacilla*; Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.18). Here, as Brian Daley has argued, the best traditions of Hellenistic culture were “absorbed...and radically reoriented” (Daley, 1999, 432). Indeed, Basil had been explicit about his aim to Christianize the key ancient virtue: “That which the Hellenes call *philanthropy* puts us to shame!” (Basil, *Homily* 8.8; trans. Holman, 2001, 191). Gregory of Nazianzus described Basil's response to this challenge as an “imitation of Christ” who had “condescended to the form of a slave to eat with

publicans and wash the disciples' feet" (*Oration* 43.63-64). In an early letter to Gregory, Basil himself had explained the ascetical principle underpinning his action as training to achieve "separation from the whole world," which for him meant not just physical withdrawal from the world but "the severance of the soul's sympathy with the body, so as to live as one who has no city (*apolin*), no home (*aoikon*), no goods, no society, no possessions, no means of life" (Basil, *Letter* 2.2). This asceticism — modelled on both the philosophical withdrawal and on Christ's self-emptying — paradoxically gave bishops like Basil authority to engage with the full spectrum of worldly affairs (Rapp, 2005); it enabled him, "noble and of noble ancestry and brilliant reputation as he was, to kiss the wounds of those afflicted with leprosy and embrace them as his own brothers" (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 43.63). The Christological connections here echo Origen, who in the 3rd century had offered a theology of hospitality based on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:27-37). He saw "the Samaritan as Christ, the wounds as disobedience, and the inn as the church which has room for all and accepts all" (*Fragments on Luke*, 168-169). This understanding of the church as *the* place of hospitality was given a visual expression not just in separate charitable institutions but also in ordinary church buildings which opened their doors to travelers to spend the night there, as did Augustine of Hippo's saintly mother in the chapel dedicated to Saint Cyprian of Carthage near the harbor from which the future bishop left for Rome (*Confessions* 5.8.15; Davies, 1968).

Churches that offered hospitality included those in monastic settlements — first in Egypt and then Palestine — which by the second half of the 4th century were receiving many pilgrims from the rest of the Christian world (Hunt, 1982). The *Rule* of Pachomius provided for a separate guesthouse to take care of the community's many visitors — of both sexes with some arriving even after sunset (chapter 50, 52). They were all to be welcomed by specially appointed guest masters with "great honor" and with the "washing of their feet, according to the gospel command" (chapter 51). This arrangement protected the brethren from distractions brought by guests, who were not allowed to take part in community meals. In the last decade of the 4th century Palladius described the arrangements at the monastic settlement at Nitria in Lower Egypt:

<quote>Next to the church is a guest-house, where they receive the stranger who has arrived, until he goes away of his own accord, without limit of time, even if he remains two or three years. (*Lausiac History* 7.2-4)</quote>

Monks did not have unlimited means and anyone who stayed for more than a week was asked to join the community at work: in the garden, or the kitchen, or the bakery, and those who could read were given books. By this time, numerous ascetics had populated the desert. In Palladius' estimation, 5,000 monks plus 600 anchorites relied on seven bakeries there for their daily bread. As for the Judean desert, a recent evaluation of archaeological data suggests that it was inhabited by some 3,000 monks who had the infrastructure to receive numerous pilgrims (Hirschfeld, 1992). In the Roman West, centers offering hospitality were known by their Greek name (Latinized as *xenodochium*). The use of the term would either mean that initially Western bishops did not have the resources of their eastern colleagues to offer institutionalized hospitality, or that they had kept the older tradition of welcoming guests in private homes (Caron, 1963, 192). Either way, hospitality was a priority. Jerome thus wrote, "Our duties in our monastery are those of hospitality (*Apology Against Rufinus* 17) and Augustine preached that to welcome a guest was to greet and shelter the Savior (*Sermon* 225; Hamman, 1979). By the turn of the 5th century the *xenodochium* of Paulinus of Nola provided excellent facilities for high profile guests (Mratschek, 2001), and later monastic commitment to hospitality was enshrined in the Rule of Benedict, "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ" (c. 53; on earlier monastic rules see Kardong, 2010).

Historiography (H1)

Scholarship on early Christian hospitality has now demonstrated how the late-antique church re-appropriated the Hellenic institution of *xenia* (Herman, 1997). In this cultural and religious osmosis, the ancient norms of hospitality were not rejected but transformed by evangelical charity (Daniélou, 1951; Caron, 1963; Constantelos, 1968), and the care shown to strangers — and to the sick and the

dying — became the main force behind the “birth of the hospital” (Miller, 1985; 2013; Ferngren, 2009; Horden, 2004; 2008). The picture of early Christians emerging through such studies is that of a “hospitable family open to the world” (Greer, 1986, 140; on later Byzantine monasticism, see Constantelos, 1968; Magdalino, 1991). This simple presentation has been enriched by the investigations of historians who have shown, for example, that the impact of Basil the Great’s hospital outside of Caesarea was not only limited to the poor who stayed there but extended to the whole area in which the institution functioned as a city within the city. This “first hospital in the Mediterranean world” has been studied as a mechanism of justification of the new financial privileges and wealth in the late 4th-century church. Its result was the altering of urban space and of the dynamics of patronage in the area—to the discontent of many contemporaries who were quick to see the political implications (Horden, 2015, 165-167). Basil’s own successor, Firmus of Caesarea, even complained that the institution could be filled with peasants running away from the estates in the area (*Letter* 43). By the sixth century, monastic hospitality underwent further developments and acquired greater political significance as seen in the laws of Justinian which ordered prisoners to be kept in selected monasteries (Hillner, 2007). Beyond strictly historical research, other contributions to the study of early Christian hospitality reflect a number of modern concerns. Global poverty, the philosophical debate on “pure” or “unconditional” hospitality, and the dynamic of gift exchange have all been linked with early Christian hospitality (Holman, 2001; Boersma, 2003; Stathakopoulos, 2007) showing the continuous relevance of the concept Homer used to define the borders of human civilization.

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